

Members of the Subcommittee on Research, Nutrition and General Legislation of the United States Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry, I am Norma Worley, Director of the Animal Welfare Program from the Great State of Maine speaking in support of the Pet Animal Welfare Statue authored by Senator Santorum and Senator Durbin.

I have been in my current position for 2 ½ years but prior to retiring to Maine in 2001 I spent 21 years as an animal cruelty investigator in Southern California. During my tenure both in Maine and California I have investigated hundreds, if not thousands, of animal cruelty cases including many dealing with breeding kennels.

As you are aware, animal welfare issues, in addition to being difficult, are usually emotionally charged. The investigation of animal cruelty can be extremely controversial, characterized by complaints from the public demanding that the animals they believe are being abused or neglected be removed immediately regardless of what the law allows us to do or the rights of the owner. The media may also compromise these investigations because as the editors put it everyone likes a good animal story. All this eventually results in lengthy debates in both state and federal legislatures analyzing and re-analyzing if our animal cruelty laws, if they even exist, are sufficient.

There are thousands of breeding kennels across the country that do everything in their power to protect their animals and obey the law. I'm sure that you have heard from some of these breeders regarding this legislation. It is important that these law abiding kennel owners know that they have nothing to fear from this proposed statue and there is no "slippery slope" or hidden agenda. Unfortunately for every one of these lawful and ethical kennel owners there are as many if not more who see the animals simply as a commodity and a way to make a quick buck.

The PAWS statue before you today identifies and seeks to correct several loopholes in current federal law that allows no protection for dogs and cats sold directly to the public by large-scale breeders. This legislation will mandate protection be applied for these animals regardless of what state the breeder lives in.

The State of Maine and it's domestic animals are fortunate in that we have some of the strongest laws in the United States thus protecting them from unscrupulous breeding kennel owners. This is not to say that we have none because we do. Of its 800+ animal cruelty complaints that we have received this year alone the State of Maine Animal Welfare Program has spent hundreds of hours alone on three investigations involving a pet shop and two breeding kennels. The end result was the 250+ dogs were removed from the two kennels. These dogs were the lucky ones as they were adopted into loving "forever homes" and have been spayed and neutered to help stop this cycle of abuse. Unfortunately the pet store just moved to another state whose laws are not as effective.

Even with these effective kennel laws not a week goes by without the Animal Welfare Program receiving a heart breaking complaint from a new owner who has purchased a pup or kitten from a less than honest breeder.

To even complicate things more we now have a new twist in marketing for these dishonest breeders. As with all new avenues of commerce the Internet is the latest tool to sell dogs and cats. Unfortunately the Internet can reach out all over the world and is difficult to track without cooperation of the user. There is nothing more frustrating to us than to receive a complaint from a new owner that may live over 3000 miles away who is heartbroken over the pup or kitten they have just received.

The usual scenario is these complainants are surfing the net looking for a particular breed and fall in love with a picture of what they think is their ideal pet. Some are looking for show caliber dogs, some just like that particular breed and want a pet or a small minority are even seeking to start their own breeding kennel.

But going back to the dilemma of the new owner. Usually the story entails how they purchased this dog over the Internet and eagerly awaited the arrival of the new addition to their family. However in most cases it is anything but a happy event when the animal arrives. These young pups, sometimes as young as 5-6 weeks are shipped to the new owner by air in a small crate held in the cargo area of the plane for trips that can be up to 12-15 hours in length. Upon arrival they are usually sick, some may have genetic disorders from poor breeding or are a horrible example of the breed. The new owner tries to contact the breeder by email or letter only to be told, if they get an answer at all, their choice is to either return the animal to the breeder which means re-shipping the animal back across the US to be treated by the breeder's veterinarian or "tough luck no compensation". The breeder usually has a "contract" that includes no refund for the purchase price or any compensation for veterinarian bills the new owner may acquire.

At this point the new owner is totally confused, upset and frustrated but as it is in most cases has now fallen in love with this poor creature, which is what the unscrupulous dealer hoped would happen. Now, the owner is faced with the horrendous choice of spending perhaps thousands of dollars at their Vet with the hope that dog recovers or return this poor critter to an uncaring breeder and to an unknown fate.

As you would suspect most decide to keep the animal even though it's not what they wanted, is not healthy and they will be saddled with outstanding vet bills. The positive side is these animals are the lucky ones, as they will spend their lives in a forever home. Unfortunately others will be sent back, nursed back to an appearance of good health only to be sold again in attempt to recoup the dealer's losses or immediately euthanized.

So, who is the real victim in these cases? Many will say it is the purchaser - they were taken advantage of. Others will scoff and say "buyer be aware" - they got what they deserved for not doing the research. Others will say this is simply a civil matter and that's what the courts are for. But keep in mind that courts are charged with settling disputes based on "paper trails" not live animals.

I come before you today to say the real victims in these cases are the puppies and kittens that are taken too young from their mothers, not socialized, many times are ill or are genetically inferior, are then shipped in the cargo holds of airplanes sometimes-enduring trips hours in length and now are unwanted. It is beyond my realm of understanding how anyone could stand by and allow this to happen.

The victims of these horrendous acts must be protected the same as domestic animals who are sold to commercial facilities. The closing of these loopholes must be addressed now in order to protect the voiceless victims in states where they have little or no protection.

I ask you to please vote in support of the Pet Animal Welfare Statue.